

# The Federal Voting Assistance Program

## Refocusing and Reorganizing for the Road Ahead

The Federal Voting Assistance Program (FVAP) administers the Uniformed and Overseas Citizens Absentee Voting Act (UOCAVA)<sup>1</sup> and helps uniformed-service members and other U.S. citizens who live outside the United States to vote. In serving this function, FVAP faces complexities, challenges, and opportunities:

- FVAP is a small agency, serving disparate and geographically dispersed customers across seven continents and 55 states and territories and associated with thousands of voting jurisdictions.
- FVAP works with a range of military and civilian organizations, both within and outside the federal government, that mirror the diversity and dispersion of UOCAVA voters.
- Although FVAP is only one provider of UOCAVA voting assistance, it has unique leadership qualifications deriving from: law, executive order, and policy directives; its knowledge of policy and operations; and its dedicated resources and tools.

In view of these circumstances, FVAP leadership approached the RAND National Defense Research Institute with concerns that the agency's mission had become blurred over time, that its operations might have fallen out of step with its mission, and that the agency would benefit from a more strategic approach to setting goals, organizing for action, and allocating resources. FVAP leadership commissioned RAND to undertake a collaborative, multiyear project known formally as "FVAP and the Road Ahead."

The RAND team worked closely with FVAP to align its strategy and operations to better serve its mission and stakeholders and to strengthen its capacity to set its own course, adapt to change, and communicate its role in the voting community. This research brief summarizes the results of the project. It does not provide a cookbook for change but suggests the possibility of replication for other agencies that are committed to change and able to support that commitment with managerial focus and staff involvement.

### Key findings:

- The Federal Voting Assistance Program (FVAP) needed to create a clearer, shared understanding of its mission.
- FVAP needed to build trust and strengthen its relationships with its stakeholders.
- FVAP needed to embrace a culture and principles of effectiveness.
- FVAP has made progress in each area by reorienting its mission, reorganizing its operations, and beginning to provide more hands-on voting assistance.

### Approach

RAND and FVAP agreed that the project must be collaborative and iterative to ensure its relevance and timeliness. The RAND team worked with FVAP to share, vet, and clarify ideas and to discuss and refine the details of the approach. The collaboration was essential to developing a full, mutual understanding of FVAP's needs, to gauging and adjusting tactics to meet those needs, and to rapidly transferring recommendations to FVAP leadership. The analysis occurred in two phases. In phase 1, the RAND team examined FVAP's voting assistance activities, the means by which it undertakes them, and the reasons it undertakes them. In phase 2, the RAND team took a step back to better understand the needs of the voting assistance system and draw out implications for FVAP's strategy and operations.

### Phase 1: Analysis of Federal Voting Assistance Program Voting Activities

The RAND team's analysis of FVAP's strategy, operations, and organization was based on information collected directly from FVAP, conversations with stakeholders outside of FVAP, and a review of the laws and policies governing FVAP. First, the team's work with FVAP, which required a substantial allocation of FVAP's managerial and staff resources, drew attention to a set of interrelated challenges:

<sup>1</sup> Public Law 99-410, August 28, 1986.

- FVAP lacked a common understanding of its mission, which appeared to reflect a lack of consensus within FVAP as to the purpose of the agency.
- FVAP was stovepiped and fragmented, functioning as loosely connected, separately managed streams of activities.
- FVAP lacked capacity and capabilities in some organizationally important areas, including those relating to data collection, research, and analysis.
- FVAP did not view staffing decisions as setting or reflecting the agency's priorities. FVAP also appeared to be top heavy, with a large share of staff in leadership and advisory positions.

Second, the team's conversations with stakeholders confirmed the perception of mission ambiguity but raised further concerns about the agency's communications, impartiality, transparency, and effectiveness. Third, the team's review of the laws and policies governing FVAP, particularly a subset of specific and direct or "core" legal requirements, suggested room for realignment among FVAP's activities.

In addition, the RAND team found disconnects among the three perspectives, with implications for the viability of FVAP's business model. FVAP saw itself, in large part, as benefiting UOCAVA voters through intermediaries, such as Voting Assistance Officers (VAOs), election officials, and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs). In contrast, stakeholders, including those intermediaries, did not see a clear path from FVAP to voting success (i.e., casting a counted ballot) and were uncertain about what FVAP was doing or why. Moreover, in terms of the core legal requirements, FVAP appeared to be doing more than necessary in some areas and possibly less in others.

Informed by these findings, the RAND team offered actionable recommendations for enabling FVAP to become a coherent, well-functioning whole, build trust and strengthen relationships with its stakeholders, and embrace a culture and principles of effectiveness. The team singled out becoming "one FVAP" as the most immediate need and recommended that the agency take three steps:

1. **Come to terms with its mission.** FVAP should establish a set of primary functions to serve a common, shared understanding of its purpose and priorities.
2. **Integrate and shore up operations to support that mission.** FVAP would benefit from consolidating resources into fewer divisions or improving connections among them, and identifying and filling organizational gaps, potentially with professional development.
3. **Communicate more effectively about its mission.** FVAP should create a single vocabulary for describing and talking about its mission.

By the time the RAND team formally delivered these recommendations to FVAP, the agency had begun to act on most of them. This was possible because the team shared the findings as they emerged to generate debate and discussion.

## Phase 2: Analysis of the Voting Assistance System and Its Implications for the Federal Voting Assistance Program

Phase 2 of the RAND team's analysis focused on the nature of the voting assistance system and the means by which FVAP might better participate in that system.

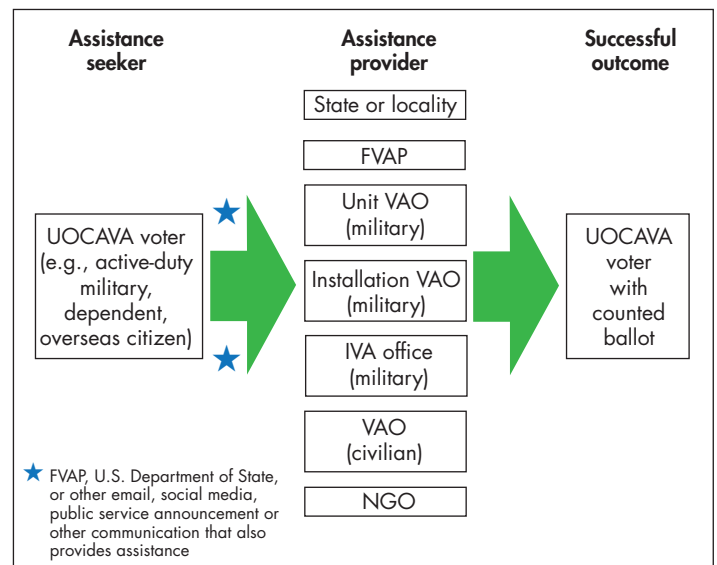
First, the team scoped the system and found the following:

- Law, policy, and the market for voting assistance services each play a part in establishing the elements of the voting assistance system, which reach across the public—federal, state, and local—and private sectors.
- Connectivity and coordination vary across the system. The system was not really developed as a system but as an accretion of requirements, constrained by competing priorities, limited resources, and cultural and environmental differences across the services and venues.
- The system and its parts share an interest in developing and maintaining the ability to serve voters, which requires knowledge and skills.

This characterization of the system suggested, as depicted in the figure, that UOCAVA voters have many options for obtaining voting assistance.

Second, the RAND team identified opportunities for FVAP to engage more effectively within the system. FVAP

### Assistance Options for Uniformed and Overseas Citizens Absentee Voting Act Voters



occupies a unique position in the voting assistance system. It has become a comprehensive repository of information on the processes, tools, and resources that it develops and maintains. As a consequence, FVAP might be the only public agency with the credentials, internal motivation, and dedicated resources to play a leadership role in UOCAVA voting assistance. FVAP can use the training that it provides to VAOs and others to leverage its position in the system. Through training, particularly in-person training, FVAP can engage its intermediaries more directly, get closer to UOCAVA voters, and reap ancillary benefits for itself and the system.

### **Evidence of Change Within the Federal Voting Assistance Program**

While the analysis was progressing, FVAP was implementing substantial change. Among those changes, FVAP's work on its mission, organization, and operations stand out prominently. FVAP reoriented its mission toward direct, hands-on assistance to intermediaries and voters, consolidated all voting assistance in a single activity stream, elevated the communication group, reconfigured the call center as an in-house voting assistance center, and embarked on new forms of engagement with states. In addition, FVAP redesigned its website, outreach materials, and training materials to communicate and support the changes. FVAP is also enrolling its staff in professional development programs to fill gaps in capabilities and capacities. FVAP has been reassessing policy guidance in light of these changes and using data and analysis to inform the direction and content of change.

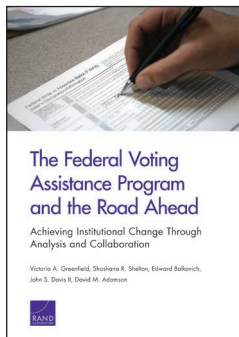
### **Recommendations for Building on Progress**

To consolidate and advance progress, the RAND team recommended that FVAP continue to take steps to become one FVAP, strengthen relationships with stakeholders, and embrace effectiveness. Among those steps, the team focused on the following:

- internalizing and outwardly projecting the mission, by adhering to the newly revised mission statement and presenting it consistently as part of its public face
- investing in leadership and staff with professional development necessary to forward the mission and give them time to absorb and apply it
- promoting organizational cohesion by improving communication, resisting the temptation to create new stovepipes, and rewarding success
- engaging with stakeholders as stakeholders and not as a passive audience or extension of the agency's operations
- taking calls for effectiveness to heart by considering the benefits, costs, and risks of the agency's actions, including decisions to undertake new projects, on a day-to-day basis and from the perspectives of stakeholders
- conducting periodic organizational health checks.

### **Lessons for Future Collaborations**

The RAND team also drew lessons from the experience with FVAP that offer a potential road map for future collaborations. FVAP's commitment to change and the mutual trust that emerged from the working relationship were essential to progress, but other elements of the relationship were also critical to success. To start, RAND and FVAP established the terms of engagement and set expectations about roles early. The teams also got to know each other, both systematically through project events and extemporaneously. In the course of getting to know each other, the teams were able to develop a shared vocabulary, learn to appreciate each other's perspectives, and find ways to engage constructively when differences in perspectives would lead to different courses of action. And the teams remained open to redirection as circumstances required. Last, the teams worked together, step by step, and communicated throughout, not just at major decision points but as a matter of regular practice. They tried and, in large part, succeeded in avoiding surprises.



This brief describes work done in the RAND National Defense Research Institute and documented in *The Federal Voting Assistance Program and the Road Ahead: Achieving Institutional Change Through Analysis and Collaboration*, by Victoria A. Greenfield, Shoshana R. Shelton, Edward Balkovich, John S. Davis II, and David M. Adamson, RR-882-OSD, 2015 (available at [www.rand.org/t/RR882](http://www.rand.org/t/RR882)). To view this brief online, visit [www.rand.org/t/RB9862](http://www.rand.org/t/RB9862). The RAND Corporation is a research organization that develops solutions to public policy challenges to help make communities throughout the world safer and more secure, healthier and more prosperous. RAND is nonprofit, nonpartisan, and committed to the public interest. RAND's publications do not necessarily reflect the opinions of its research clients and sponsors. RAND® is a registered trademark. © RAND 2015

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